

Facing the Myth of Redemptive Violence

by Sean Reilly | Nov 15, 2014

The belief that violence “saves” is so successful because it doesn’t seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It’s what works. It seems inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts. If a god is what you turn to when all else fails, violence certainly functions as a god. What people overlook, then, is the religious character of violence. It demands from its devotees an absolute obedience-unto-death.

This Myth of Redemptive Violence is the real myth of the modern world. It, and not Judaism or Christianity or Islam, is the dominant religion in our society today. When my children were small, we let them log an unconscionable amount of television, and I became fascinated with the mythic structure of cartoons. This was in the 1960s, when the “death of God” theologians were being feted on talk shows, and secular humanity’s tolerance for religious myth and mystery were touted as having been exhausted.

I began to examine the structure of cartoons, and found the same pattern repeated endlessly: an indestructible hero is doggedly opposed to an irreformable and equally indestructible villain. Nothing can kill the hero, though for the first three quarters of the comic strip or TV show he (rarely she) suffers grievously and appears hopelessly doomed, until miraculously, the hero breaks free, vanquishes the villain, and restores order until the next episode. Nothing finally destroys the villain or prevents his or her reappearance, whether the villain is soundly trounced, jailed, drowned, or shot into outer space.

Few cartoons have run longer or been more influential than Popeye and Bluto. In a typical segment, Bluto abducts a screaming and kicking Olive Oyl, Popeye’s girlfriend. When Popeye attempts to rescue her, the massive Bluto beats his diminutive opponent to a pulp, while Olive Oyl helplessly wrings her hands. At the last moment, as our hero oozes to the floor, and Bluto is trying, in effect, to rape Olive Oyl, a can of spinach pops from Popeye’s pocket and spills into his mouth.

Transformed by this gracious infusion of power, he easily demolishes the villain and rescues his beloved. The format never varies. Neither party ever gains any insight or learns from these encounters. They never sit down and discuss their differences. Repeated defeats do not teach Bluto to honour Olive Oyl’s humanity, and repeated pummellings do not teach Popeye to swallow his spinach before the fight.

Something about this mythic structure rang familiar. Suddenly I remembered: this cartoon pattern mirrored one of the oldest continually enacted myths in the world, the Babylonian creation story (the Enuma Elish) from around 1250 BCE. The tale bears repeating, because it holds the clue to the appeal of that ancient myth in our modern media.

In the beginning, according to the Babylonian myth, Apsu, the father god, and Tiamat, the mother god, give birth to the gods. But the frolicking of the younger gods makes so much noise that the elder gods resolve to kill them so they can sleep. The younger gods uncover the plot before the elder gods put it into action, and kill Apsu. His wife Tiamat, the Dragon of Chaos, pledges revenge.

Terrified by Tiamat, the rebel gods turn for salvation to their youngest member, Marduk. He negotiates a steep price: if he succeeds, he must be given chief and undisputed power in the assembly of the gods. Having extorted this promise, he catches Tiamat in a net, drives an evil wind down her throat, shoots an arrow that bursts her distended belly and pierces her heart. He then splits her skull with a club and scatters her blood in out-of-the-way places. He stretches out her corpse full-length, and from it creates the cosmos. (With all this blood and gore, no wonder this story proved ideal as the prototype of violent TV shows and Hollywood movies).

In this myth, creation is an act of violence. Marduk murders and dismembers Tiamat, and from her cadaver creates the world. As the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur observes (The Symbolism of Evil, Harper Collins 1967), order is established by means of disorder. Chaos (symbolised by Tiamat) is prior to

order (represented by Marduk, high god of Babylon). Evil precedes good. The gods themselves are violent.

The biblical myth in Genesis 1 is diametrically opposed to all this (Genesis 1, it should be noted, was developed in Babylon during the Jewish captivity there as a direct rebuttal to the Babylonian myth). The Bible portrays a good God who creates a good creation. Chaos does not resist order. Good is prior to evil. Neither evil nor violence is part of the creation, but enter later, as a result of the first couple's sin and the connivance of the serpent (Genesis 3). A basically good reality is thus corrupted by free decisions reached by creatures. In this far more complex and subtle explanation of the origins of things, violence emerges for the first time as a problem requiring solution.

In the Babylonian myth, however, violence is no problem. It is simply a primordial fact. The simplicity of this story commended it widely, and its basic mythic structure spread as far as Syria, Phoenicia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Germany, Ireland, India, and China. Typically, a male war god residing in the sky fights a decisive battle with a female divine being, usually depicted as a monster or dragon, residing in the sea or abyss (the feminine element). Having vanquished the original enemy by war and murder, the victor fashions a cosmos from the monster's corpse. Cosmic order requires the violent suppression of the feminine, and is mirrored in the social order by the subjection of women to men and people to ruler.

After the world has been created, the story continues, the gods imprisoned by Marduk for siding with Tiamat complain of the poor meal service. Marduk and his father, Ea, therefore execute one of the captive gods, and from his blood Ea creates human beings to be servants to the gods.

The implications are clear: human beings are created from the blood of a murdered god. Our very origin is violence. Killing is in our genes. Humanity is not the originator of evil, but merely finds evil already present and perpetuates it. Our origins are divine, to be sure, since we are made from a god, but from the blood of an assassinated god.

Human beings are thus naturally incapable of peaceful coexistence. Order must continually be imposed upon us from on high: men over women, masters over slaves, priests over laity, aristocrats over peasants, rulers over people. Unquestioning obedience is the highest virtue, and order the highest religious value. As Marduk's representative on earth, the king's task is to subdue all those enemies who threaten the tranquillity that he has established on behalf of the god. The whole cosmos is a state, and the god rules through the king. Politics arises within the divine sphere itself. Salvation is politics: the masses identify with the god of order against the god of chaos, and offer themselves up for the Holy War that imposes order and rule on the peoples round about.

In short, the Myth of Redemptive Violence is the story of the victory of order over chaos by means of violence. It is the ideology of conquest, the original religion of the status quo. The gods favour those who conquer. Conversely, whoever conquers must have the favour of the gods. The common people exist to perpetuate the advantage that the gods have conferred upon the king, the aristocracy, and the priesthood.

Religion exists to legitimate power and privilege. Life is combat. Any form of order is preferable to chaos, according to this myth. Ours is neither a perfect nor perfectible world; it is theatre of perpetual conflict in which the prize goes to the strong. Peace through war, security through strength: these are the core convictions that arise from this ancient historical religion, and they form the solid bedrock on which the Domination System is founded in every society.

The Babylonian myth is far from finished. It is as universally present and earnestly believed today as at any time in its long and bloody history. It is the dominant myth in contemporary America. It enshrines the ritual practice of violence at the very heart of public life, and even those who seek to oppose its oppressive violence do so violently.

We have already seen how the myth of redemptive violence is played out in the structure of children's cartoon shows (and is found as well in comics, video and computer games, and movies). But we also encounter it in the media, in sports, in nationalism, in militarism, in foreign policy, in televangelism, in the religious right, and in self-styled militia groups. What appears so innocuous in cartoons is, in fact, the mythic underpinnings of our violent society.

The psychodynamics of the TV cartoon or comic book are marvelously simple: children identify with the good guy so that they can think of themselves as good. This enables them to project out onto the bad guy their own repressed anger, violence, rebelliousness, or lust, and then vicariously to enjoy their own

evil by watching the bad guy initially prevail. This segment of the show – the “Tammuz” element, where the hero suffers – actually consumes all but the closing minutes, allowing ample time for indulging the violent side of the self.

When the good guy finally wins, viewers are then able to reassert control over their own inner tendencies, repress them, and re-establish a sense of goodness without coming to any insight about their own inner evil. The villain’s punishment provides catharsis; one forswears the villain’s ways and heaps condemnation on him in a guilt-free orgy of aggression. Salvation is found through identification with the hero.

Only the names have changed. Marduk subdues Tiamat through violence, and though he kills Tiamat, chaos incessantly reasserts itself, and is kept at bay only by repeated battles and by the repetition of the Babylonian New Year’s festival where the heavenly combat myth is ritually re-enacted. Theologian Willis Elliott’s observation underscores the seriousness of this entertainment: “the birth of the world (cosmogony) is the birth of the individual (egogony): you are being birthed through how you see ‘all things’ as being birthed”. Therefore “Whoever controls the cosmogony controls the children”.

The Myth of Redemptive Violence is the simplest, laziest, most exciting, uncomplicated, irrational, and primitive depiction of evil the world has even known. Furthermore, its orientation toward evil is one into which virtually all modern children (boys especially) are socialised in the process of maturation. Children select this mythic structure because they have already been led, by culturally reinforced cues and role models, to resonate with its simplistic view of reality. Its presence everywhere is not the result of a conspiracy of Babylonian priests secretly buying up the mass media with Iraqi oil money, but a function of values endlessly reinforced by the Domination System. By making violence pleasurable, fascinating, and entertaining, the Powers are able to delude people into compliance with a system that is cheating them of their very lives.

Once children have been indoctrinated into the expectations of a dominator society, they may never outgrow the need to locate all evil outside themselves. Even as adults they tend to scapegoat others for all that is wrong in the world. They continue to depend on group identification and the upholding of social norms for a sense of well-being.

In a period when attendance at Christian Sunday schools is dwindling, the myth of redemptive violence has won children’s voluntary acquiescence to a regimen of indoctrination more extensive and effective than any in the history of religions. Estimates vary widely, but the average child reported to log roughly 36,000 hours of television by age 18, viewing some 15,000 murders. What church or synagogue can even remotely keep pace with the myth of redemptive violence in hours spent teaching children or the quality of presentation? (Think of the typical “children’s sermon” – how bland by comparison!)

No other religious system has even remotely rivalled the myth of redemptive violence in its ability to catechise its young so totally. From the earliest age, children are awash in depictions of violence as the ultimate solution to human conflicts. Nor does saturation in the myth end with the close of adolescence. There is no rite of passage from adolescent to adult status in the national cult of violence, but rather a years-long assimilation to adult television and movie fare.

Not all shows for children or adults are based on violence, of course. Reality is far more complex than the simplicities of this myth, and maturer minds will demand more subtle, nuanced, complex presentations. But the basic structure of the combat myth underlies the pap to which a great many adults turn in order to escape the harsher realities of their everyday lives: spy thrillers, westerns, cop shows, and combat programmes. It is as if we must watch so much “redemptive” violence to reassure ourselves, against the deluge of facts to the contrary in our actual day-to-day lives, that reality really is that simple.

Redemptive violence gives way to violence as an end in itself. It is no longer a religion that uses violence in the pursuit of order and salvation, but one in which violence has become an aphrodisiac, sheer titillation, an addictive high, a substitute for relationships. Violence is no longer the means to a higher good, namely order; violence becomes the end.

(First published on 16 November 2007.)

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